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MAILED

FEB 17 2011

OFFICE OF PETITIONS

In re Patent No. 6,409,599 :  
Issue Date: 06/25/2002 :  
Application Number: 09/617,388 : ON PETITION  
Filing Date: 07/17/2000 :  
Attorney Docket Number: 43339- :  
88004 :

This is a decision is in response to the petition under 37 CFR 1.378(b),<sup>1</sup> filed on January 6, 2011, to accept the delayed payment of the maintenance fee for the above-identified patent.

The petition is dismissed.

If reconsideration of this decision is desired, a petition for reconsideration under 37 CFR 1.378(e) must be filed within TWO (2) MONTHS from the mail date of this decision. No extension of

<sup>1</sup> A grantable petition to accept a delayed maintenance fee payment under 37 CFR 1.378(b) must be include

(1) the required maintenance fee set forth in § 1.20(e) through (g);  
(2) the surcharge set forth in § 1.20(I)(1); and  
(3) a showing that the delay was unavoidable since reasonable care was taken to ensure that the maintenance fee would be paid timely and that the petition was filed promptly after the patentee was notified of, or otherwise became aware of, the expiration of the patent. The showing must enumerate the steps taken to ensure timely payment of the maintenance fee, the date and the manner in which patentee became aware of the expiration of the patent, and the steps taken to file the petition promptly.

this 2-month time limit can be granted under 37 CFR 1.136(a) or (b). Any such petition for reconsideration must be accompanied by the petition fee of \$400.00 as set forth in 37 CFR 1.17(f). The petition for reconsideration should include an exhaustive attempt to provide the lacking item(s) noted below, since, after a decision on the petition for reconsideration, no further reconsideration or review of the matter will be undertaken by the Director.

The patent issued on June 25, 2002. The first maintenance fee was timely paid. The second maintenance fee could have been paid during the period from June 25 through December 28, 2009, or, with a surcharge, during the period from December 29, 2009, through June 25, 2010. Accordingly, this patent expired at midnight on June 25, 2010, for failure to timely remit the maintenance fee.

At the outset, although the petition is properly signed by all inventors, the statement of unavoidable delay is signed only by joint inventor Randy T. Sprout. All papers and statements which are required to be signed must be signed by all of the inventors, a registered patent practitioner, the assignee, or other party in interest. Any renewed petition must have the statement of unavoidable delay, as well as the petition, properly signed.

Nevertheless, the statement reads, in pertinent part:

The petitioners did not receive the reminder notice for the patent maintenance fees that were due.

The notice must have been sent to the original attorneys that helped us with the filing:

"Greensfelder Hemker & Gale PC"

and they did not notify us about the fee due, nor did they forward the reminder notice to us or our current law firm:

"Berger Cohen Brandt Law Firm, 8000 Maryland Avenue, Suite 1550, Clayton, MO 63105"

Recently, the Greensfelder firm forwarded the patent expiration notice to our current law firm, and they sent it to us, the petitioners. Therefore, we did not know about the fee due, nor the expiration, until now.

Once this matter came to our attention, we contacted the USPTO via telephone and processed this petition.

A petition to accept the delayed maintenance fee under 35 U.S.C. § 41(c) and 37 CFR 1.378(b) must be accompanied by (1) an adequate, verified showing that the delay was unavoidable, since reasonable care was taken to ensure that the maintenance fee would be paid timely and that the petition was filed promptly after the patentee was notified of, or otherwise became aware of, the expiration of the patent, (2) payment of the appropriate maintenance fee, unless previously submitted, and (3) payment of the surcharge set forth in 37 CFR 1.20(i)(1). This petition lacks requirement (1).

The Director may accept late payment of the maintenance fee if the delay is shown to the satisfaction of the Director to have been "unavoidable".<sup>2</sup>

A late maintenance fee is considered under the same standard as that for reviving an abandoned application under 35 U.S.C. § 133 because 35 U.S.C. § 41(c)(1) uses identical language (i.e. "unavoidable delay").<sup>3</sup> Decisions reviving abandoned applications have adopted the reasonably prudent person standard in determining if the delay was unavoidable.<sup>4</sup> In this regard:

The word 'unavoidable' . . . is applicable to ordinary human affairs, and requires no more or greater care or diligence than is generally used and observed by prudent and careful men in relation to their most important business. It permits them in the exercise of this care to rely upon the ordinary and trustworthy agencies of mail and telegraph, worthy and reliable employees, and such other means and instrumentalities as are usually employed in such important business. If unexpectedly, or through the unforeseen fault or imperfection of these agencies and instrumentalities, there occurs a failure, it may properly be said to be

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<sup>2</sup> 35 U.S.C. § 41(c)(1).

<sup>3</sup> Ray v. Lehman, 55 F.3d 606, 608-09, 34 USPQ2d 1786, 1787 (Fed. Cir. 1995) (quoting In re Patent No. 4,409,763, 7 USPQ2d 1798, 1800 (Comm'r Pat. 1989)).

<sup>4</sup> Ex parte Pratt, 1887 Dec. Comm'r Pat. 31, 32-33 (Comm'r Pat. 1887) (the term "unavoidable" "is applicable to ordinary human affairs, and requires no more or greater care or diligence than is generally used by prudent and careful men in relation to their most important business").

unavoidable, all other conditions of promptness in its rectification being present.<sup>5</sup>

As 35 U.S.C. § 41(c) requires the payment of fees at specified intervals to maintain a patent in force, rather than some response to a specific action by the Office under 35 U.S.C. § 133, a reasonably prudent person in the exercise of due care and diligence would have taken steps to ensure the timely payment of such maintenance fees.<sup>6</sup> That is, an adequate showing that the delay was "unavoidable" within the meaning of 35 U.S.C. § 41(c) and 37 CFR 1.378(b)(3) requires a showing of the steps taken to ensure the timely payment of the maintenance fees for this patent.<sup>7</sup>

At the outset, petitioners' contention that they did not receive any notification from the USPTO that the maintenance fee was due is not well taken. A patentee's lack of knowledge of the need to pay the maintenance fee and the failure to receive the Maintenance Fee Reminder do not constitute unavoidable delay.<sup>8</sup> Under the statute and regulations, the Office has no duty to notify patentees of the requirement to pay maintenance fees or to notify patentees when the maintenance fees are due. The Office mailing of Maintenance Fee Reminders is carried out strictly as a courtesy. Accordingly, it is solely the responsibility of the patentee to assure that the maintenance fee is timely paid to prevent expiration of the patent. The lack of knowledge of the requirement to pay a maintenance fee and/or the failure to receive the Maintenance Fee Reminder will not shift the burden of monitoring the time for paying a maintenance fee from the patentee to the Office.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In re Mattullath, 38 App. D.C. 497, 514-15 (1912) (quoting Ex parte Pratt, 1887 Dec. Comm'r Pat. 31, 32-33 (1887)); see also Winkler v. Ladd, 221 F. Supp. 550, 552, 138 USPQ 666, 167-68 (D.D.C. 1963), aff'd, 143 USPQ 172 (D.C. Cir. 1963); Ex parte Henrich, 1913 Dec. Comm'r Pat. 139, 141 (1913). In addition, decisions on revival are made on a "case-by-case basis, taking all the facts and circumstances into account." Smith v. Mossinghoff, 671 F.2d 533, 538, 213 USPQ 977, 982 (D.C. Cir. 1982). Finally, a petition cannot be granted where a petitioner has failed to meet his or her burden of establishing that the delay was "unavoidable." Haines v. Quigg, 673 F. Supp. 314, 316-17, 5 USPQ2d 1130, 1131-32 (N.D. Ind. 1987).

<sup>6</sup> Ray, 55 F.3d at 609, 34 USPQ2d at 1788.

<sup>7</sup> Id.

<sup>8</sup> See Patent No. 4,409,763, *supra*; see also "Final Rules for Patent Maintenance Fees" 49 Fed. Reg. 34716, 34722-34723 (August 31, 1984), *reprinted in* 1046 Off. Gaz. Pat. Office 28, 34 (September 25, 1984).

<sup>9</sup> Rydeen v. Quigg, 748 F. supp. at 900.

A delay resulting from a lack of knowledge or improper application of the patent statute, rules of practice, or the MPEP does not constitute an "unavoidable" delay.<sup>10</sup>

Further, it is unclear whether petitioner had engaged either the original law firm (hereinafter "the Greensfelder firm") or the law firm of Berger Cohen Brandt Law Firm, 8000 Maryland Avenue, Suite 1550, Clayton, MO 631054 (hereinafter "the Berger firm") to track and pay the maintenance fee. Assuming, *arguendo*, petitioners alleged chose to rely upon one or both of those firms, such reliance *per se* does not provide petitioner with a showing of unavoidable delay within the meaning of 37 CFR 1.378(b) and 35 U.S.C. § 41(c).<sup>11</sup> Rather, such reliance merely shifts the focus of the inquiry from petition to whether the attorney or agent acted reasonably and prudently.<sup>12</sup> As such, assuming that the agent had been so engaged, then it is incumbent upon petitioner to demonstrate, via a documented showing, that the attorney or agent had docketed this patent for the first maintenance fee payment in a reliable tracking system.<sup>13</sup> If petitioner cannot establish that agent had been so engaged, then petitioner will have to demonstrate what steps were established by petitioner to monitor and pay the maintenance fee.

Therefore, petitioners must show whether the Greensfelder and/or the Berger firm were engaged to track and pay the maintenance fee. If neither firm was so engaged, petitioners must show that they had a system in place to track and pay the maintenance fee. If the original attorneys at Greensfelder were so engaged, petitioners should send a letter (accompanied by a copy of this decision) to the practitioners by registered or certified mail, return receipt requested, indicating to the agent that the USPTO is requesting his assistance in determining the circumstances surrounding the expiration of this patent, and is specifically requesting the practitioner(s) to provide a statement as to: (1) whether, and when, he first became aware that the first maintenance fee for this patent was due, and (2) why the maintenance fee was not timely submitted. Such statements should be accompanied by copies of any documents relevant to payment of the maintenance fee. In the event that the practitioner(s) fails

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<sup>10</sup> See Haines v. Quigg, 673 F. Supp. 314, 317, 5 USPQ 1130, 1132 (N.D. Ind. 1987), Vincent v. Mossinghoff, 230 USPQ 621, 624 (D.D.C. 1985); Smith v. Diamond, 209 USPQ 1091 (D.D.C. 1981); Potter v. Dann, 201 USPQ 574 (D.D.C. 1978); Ex parte Murray, 1891 Dec. Comm'r Pat. 130, 131 (1891).

<sup>11</sup> See California Med. Prod. v. Technol. Med. Prod., 921 F. Supp. 1219, 1259 (D. Del. 1995).

<sup>12</sup> Id.

<sup>13</sup> Id.

to provide a statement within a person (e.g. within one (1) month) specified in such letter, petitioner should submit a copy of such letter and the return receipt indicating its delivery to the patent attorney or agent with any petition for reconsideration under 37 CFR 1.378(e).

The above paragraph notwithstanding, petitioner is reminded that the failure of communication between an applicant and counsel is not unavoidable delay.<sup>14</sup> Specifically, delay resulting from a lack of proper communication between a patent holder and a registered representative as to who bore the responsibility for payment of a maintenance fee does not constitute unavoidable delay within the meaning of 35 U.S.C. § 41(c) and 37 CFR 1.378(b).<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the Office is not the proper forum for resolving a dispute as to the effectiveness of communications between parties regarding the responsibility for paying a maintenance fee.<sup>16</sup>

In summary, the showing of record suggests that petitioners did not have a system in place to track and pay the maintenance fee. As the showing of record does not rise to the level of unavoidable delay, the petition will be dismissed.

Petitioner should note that if this petition is not renewed, or if renewed and not granted, then the maintenance fee and post-expiration surcharge are refundable. The \$400.00 petition fee for seeking reconsideration is not refundable. Any request for refund should be in writing to the address noted below.

#### **ALTERNATIVE VENUE**

Petitioners may wish, in the alternative, to request reconsideration in the form of a petition under 37 CFR 1.378(c), requesting that the unintentionally delayed payment of a maintenance fee be accepted. A petition to accept the delayed payment of a maintenance fee under 35 U.S.C. 41(c) and 37 CFR 1.378(c) must be filed within twenty four months from the end of the six month grace period (e.g., the expiration date of the patent and be accompanied by (1) a verified statement that the delay was unintentional, (2) payment of the appropriate maintenance fee, unless previously submitted, (3) payment of the \$1,640.00 surcharge (the \$700.00 surcharge already paid may be credited thereto leaving a balance due of \$940.00) set forth in

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<sup>14</sup> In re Kim, 12 USPQ2d 1595 (Comm'r Pat. 1988).

<sup>15</sup> See Ray v. Lehman, 55 F.3d 606, 610, 34 USPQ2d 1786, 1789 (Fed. Cir. 1995).

<sup>16</sup> Id.

37 CFR 1.20(i)(2). The statement can be verified by using the attached petition form which includes a declaration according to 37 CFR 1.68.

The filing of a petition under the unintentional standard cannot be intentionally delayed and therefore should be filed promptly. A person seeking revival due to unintentional delay can not make a statement that the delay was unintentional unless the entire delay, including the delay from the date it was discovered that the patent was expired until the filing of the petition to reinstate under 37 CFR 1.378(c), was unintentional. A statement that the delay was unintentional is not appropriate if petitioner intentionally delayed the filing of a petition for revival under 37 CFR 1.378(c).

Further correspondence with respect to this matter should be addressed as follows:

By mail:           Mail Stop Petition  
                  Commissioner for Patents  
                  P.O. Box 1450  
                  Alexandria, VA 22313-1450

By FAX:           (571) 273-8300  
                  Attn: Office of Petitions

By hand:           Customer Service Window  
                  Mail Stop Petition  
                  Randolph Building  
                  401 Dulany Street  
                  Alexandria, VA 22314

In view of the request to change the correspondence address, the correspondence address has been updated.

The address in the petition is different than the correspondence address. A courtesy copy of this decision will be mailed to the address in the petition. All future correspondence, however, will be mailed solely to the address of record. A change of correspondence address must be filed if the correspondence address needs to be updated.

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Telephone inquiries should be directed to the undersigned at 571-272-3231.



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